

Healing the Soul of the Motor City

Pastor and gospel music pioneer Marvin Winans aims to revitalize Detroit through the ministry of his Perfecting Church

On a windy autumn afternoon, pastor Marvin Winans stands in the pulpit of Perfecting Church in Detroit, warming up his sermon about a reluctant prophet. Drawing his message from the book of Jonah, he tells the congregation of Jonah's initial refusal to preach about Nineveh's pending destruction and explains that the city's eventual change came only after the prophet submitted to God's instructions.

The same is true today, he says. The world needs preachers who are brave enough to say what God tells them, even if the message is unpopular. "We don't need another political icon, we need a preacher," Winans tells the congregation. "If we had a preacher, we would understand what is going on in Iraq, what is going on in Israel. ... We can't silence our voice because [we're afraid] we'll lose our tax exemption or our 501(c)(3) [nonprofit status]."

Many observers see Winans as one of those preachers. Since he founded 4,000-member Perfecting Church in 1989, the 49-year-old pastor has been intent on "saving Detroit." He advocates better housing and health care, operates a school and a transitional home for women, and is becoming increasingly vocal on political issues.

He has lobbied against gay rights legislation on Capitol Hill and challenged the Detroit City Council's plan to increase the number of strip clubs. He is among ministers who have been

invited to the White House, first while President Bill Clinton was in office and three times during George W. Bush's presidency. And in recent months Democratic presidential hopefuls Barack Obama and John Edwards have contacted him to gain his support, though at press time he hadn't endorsed either candidate.

Still, he doesn't consider himself a political power broker. "I haven't been invited to a fishing trip at Crawford [the president's Texas ranch]," he says. "But I have been invited to meetings where there were 17 pastors from around the country and have been debriefed on trips that the president has made.

"Folks know I'm no heavyweight in this arena at all. I know if I do my work in the community, it's inevitable that they are going to call. If I didn't look at 3,000 or 4,000 people every Sunday, they wouldn't be inviting me. They wouldn't be calling."

To Winans, speaking out about political issues is part of offering spiritual leadership. "I don't consider myself a political pastor," Winans told Charisma, "but it's impossible to serve as many people as we serve and not become involved in the law and societal changes. We have to affect them.

"I'm not running for political office, and it's not that I'm dissatisfied. My primary purpose is to preach the gospel, and the primary purpose of the church is to save souls. But I cannot ignore the fact that there are laws that affect society, and we have to influence them."

Taking a Stand

Winans came to prominence in the 1980s as a member of the Grammy Award-winning gospel quartet The Winans. He and his brothers Carvin, Michael and Ronald, who died of heart complications in 2005, turned gospel music on its heels with a contemporary sound that gained wide mainstream appeal. Songs such as "Let My People Go," "Ain't No Need to Worry," with singer Anita Baker, and "Love Has No Color," with Michael McDonald were played on pop radio stations and in nightclubs, and climbed both gospel and R&B charts.

All along, Winans says he sensed a call to pastor a church, but dodged it for years. Then in May 1989, at the height of The Winans' success, he started Perfecting Church with eight members who met in the basement of his home.

He drew the name from Colossians 1:28, which says, "Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus" (NKJV). Today Perfecting Church oversees a congregation that gospel artist Donnie McClurkin, a former associate minister at Perfecting, started in New York in 2001.

Delores "Mom" Winans says she was never surprised by her son's decision to be a pastor. She says among her 10 children, Marvin always took charge. Even as a child, he pretended to be a preacher, insisting that his siblings play church while he delivered sermons at home.

As a teenager, he preached at his great-grandfather's church, Zion Congregational Church of God in Christ, and later at Shalom Temple, both in Detroit. He started a Bible study at Mumford High School in Detroit, and was a youth leader at church. "He's a leader. He wants to be everybody's father," she says jokingly. "He wants to be my father, even though I

birthed him.”

Mom Winans says her son always has been outspoken, even a little bossy, but eroding social and moral conditions are what forced him to speak out politically. “When you are taught the Word of God, and live by His law, His principles, when anything comes against it, you aren’t going to stand for it,” she says.

“The social system, the schools once had standards, principles. Today everything goes. He’s speaking out now because so much more is happening now. God has in place people who are going to stand on His Word. Marvin is one of those people.”

Last April, he was among a coalition of socially conservative African-American ministers who lobbied Congress to vote against a bill that would extend federal hate-crime laws to cover gays, convinced the bill would prevent pastors from preaching against homosexual activity.

He urged House Judiciary Committee Chairman John Conyers Jr., D-Michigan, one of the bill’s sponsors, and other members of the Congressional Black Caucus to vote against the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which gay rights activist contend is comparable to 1960s civil rights legislation.

Although many African-American ministers remained silent on the bill, which the NAACP supported, Winans would not be quiet, believing it would hurt America. The bill passed in the House and is awaiting consideration by the Senate. “What you want me to believe is that ... based on sexual behavior, you are

to have class status?" he says.

"Here is the problem: The law is stated that they will be granted class status based on sexual orientation and gender. The American Psychiatric Association has at least 25 different sexual orientations, which includes pedophilia. That's where it's heading. You sign this into law, and the pedophile has the right to say, 'I was born this way,' and they have constitutional protection by law."

Last summer, Winans opposed the Detroit City Council's decision to allow new strip clubs in the city, which is home to 40 percent of Michigan's 70 or so adult entertainment venues. He spoke to reporters and lobbied several council members, encouraging them not to support a license transfer for a Larry Flynt Hustler strip club in downtown Detroit, expected to be the state's largest topless bar.

Initially, the council rejected the Hustler club, slated to open early this year. But it approved the club when the city was threatened with a lawsuit. Three other clubs also were approved. As a result, Winans declared war on council members who supported the adult businesses. "They are going to have problems come time to be re-elected," he says. "I promise they are going to have problems, and I'm going to work to that end."

Six years ago, Winans developed a vehicle to mobilize church members to effect political change. Operated through the church's political relations department, the ministry provides voter registration opportunities and has hosted debates among candidates during election seasons.

The department also ensures that members understand proposed legislation such as the Michigan children's health care bill and the federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which is designed to prevent discrimination against homosexuality in the workplace.

Richard Mack, a Detroit attorney and church member who runs the political relations ministry, keeps Winans informed about national, state and local policy moves. The two develop a strategy and take action, joining forces with other churches.

Mack says he's impressed with Winans' knowledge of law. "I'm a lawyer, and not a day goes by that I don't read something political," he says, noting that Winans calls himself a "Biblican" or a "Biblicrat," which he defines as a nonpartisan man of the Bible. "He's already so politically astute that it raises the bar for me to tell him something he doesn't know."

Observers say Winans is part of a national trend that finds more pastors speaking out on political issues they believe will negatively impact their communities and the nation, claims Mathew Staver, founder of Liberty Counsel, a nonprofit law firm that defends religious freedom, sanctity of human life and the traditional family.

The trend has slowly gained fuel since the Internal Revenue Service in 1954 amended the tax code to keep pastors from endorsing political candidates, adds Staver, also dean of Liberty University School of Law based in Lynchburg, Virginia. "We have had a time when pastors were silent, some of which were silent because they feared speaking out would prevent their tax-exempt status," Staver says. "Pastors have become less intimidated in speaking out on matters of biblical concern. "

John Vaughan agrees. “Politicians think of it more as politics, but pastors think of it as values,” says the founder of Church Growth Today, a research and consulting organization that tracks the nation’s most influential 100 churches. “When those governing processes get into moral issues, churches will respond. That’s what Marvin Winans is doing.”

Community Ministry

Yet for Winans, “saving Detroit” involves more than political activism. Displeased with Detroit’s educational system, he founded the Marvin L. Winans Academy of Performing Arts, a nondenominational Christian charter school that has grown from 288 students 18 years ago to 1,100 today.

Students learn to play the violin in kindergarten and perform classical works on demand. The school has been so successful that Winans has been encouraged to help start similar institutions around the nation.

Tanya Bennett, director of the school’s Performing Arts Orchestra, says Winans may pop in at any time, expecting a performance. And the students have learned to be prepared. Senior Kyle Dickson, who plays violin and cello and composes music, says the pastor’s commanding presence and high standards make a positive difference.

“Some people think we’re like a military private school,” he says. “We’re not being bullied, but we’re expected to act like young adults. And I feel safe here.”

The five women who live in the Amelia Agnes Transitional Home

for Women that Winans founded in suburban Detroit also say they feel safe. Whether they were victims of domestic abuse, facing homelessness or “mail-order brides” from other countries, the residents and their children find a refuge in the upscale house, where they can remain for two years.

Winans says the project was born during a meeting with a new church member who lived with a man who wasn't her husband. When Winans asked her to discontinue the arrangement, she said she had nowhere else to go. “It dawned on me that I couldn't tell people what to do without giving them options,” he says.

In addition to the outreach projects, Winans is building a 4,600-seat sanctuary in a 155,000 square-foot facility. Talk-show host Oprah Winfrey was keynote speaker at a black-tie fundraiser that launched the \$51 million initiative in 2003.

The first phase, which includes a sanctuary, administration building and television studio, was scheduled to be completed in November. Senior housing and condominiums comprise phase two, and retail stores will conclude the development.

“He's a visionary to build an edifice and housing for the betterment of the community in this day and time,” says Bishop Andrew Merritt, pastor of 6,000-member Straight Gate International Church in Detroit and one of Winans' longtime friends. “Where is he going to get the money? He will get it from the Lord.”

Despite his celebrity, Winans has remained a hands-on pastor, says Cindy Flowers, Perfecting Church's general manager. “He's a very compassionate person, very concerned about other people and very approachable,” she says.

Flowers says Winans takes the time to counsel congregants and meets new members personally. Merritt notes that he officiates at funerals and often sings.

“He’s a great, great preacher, but you wouldn’t know it when he comes out of the pulpit,” Merritt says. “He becomes the funny man, the boss. He doesn’t have this ego bigger than the room. Anybody that is that gifted, that anointed, but when he comes out, he becomes the man.”

Winans, the man, is father of three sons, Mario, 32, Marvin Jr., 28, and Joshua, 20. Mario and Marvin Jr. have recorded CDs as a solo artist and as part of Winans Phase 2, respectively. Marvin Winans has remained single since he and gospel artist Vickie Winans divorced in 1995.

Although he says preaching is his passion, Winans hasn’t abandoned his musical roots. In September he released his first solo CD project, *Alone But Not Alone*, which he hopes will influence gospel music songwriters.

“I needed to get back out here to give a light to the writing of gospel music,” he says. “It’s easy to open the Bible and sing one word for 20 minutes instead of putting your personal experience in it. Sometimes that can be a painful thing.”

In October, he and brothers Carvin and Michael were inducted into the Gospel Music Association Hall of Fame. And in March he will make his film debut in *Mama, I Want to Sing*, in which he portrays a preacher. The movie also stars singer Ciara, Patti LaBelle and Lynn Whitfield.

But whether preaching in his pulpit, performing on stage or

challenging public policy, Winans seeks to stay faithful to God's instructions. "The goal is to have no difference in who you see in the pulpit, on stage or in the community," he says. "I'm just a guy who lives by himself, and goes to sleep at night. There are no secrets."

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